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### Citation

Bayat, A. (2008). Everyday Cosmopolitanism. *Isim Review*, 22(1), 5-5. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/17246>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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# Everyday Cosmopolitanism

It might sound out of place to speak of, let alone, invoke the idea of cosmopolitanism in the current global conditions that are dominated by the language of “clash” – clash of cultures, civilizations, religions, or ethnicities. The discourse of clash is currently so overwhelming as though it were the central feature of our international, religious, and communal

life. The media apart, academia is also inclined to concentrate far more on human “conflict” as a subject of scholarly inquiry than on “cooperation” and “sharing.” Precisely because of this prevalent preoccupation with clash, it becomes morally imperative to underline the other, more common but unnoticed and inaudible processes of human conduct, to show how people belonging to different cultural groupings can transcend their immediate selves by intensely interacting in their life-worlds with members of other ethnic or religious collectives. Would we still imagine today’s Iraq as the “natural” embodiment of sharp ethnic and religious boundaries (because the “nation” was no more than an artificial and imposed construct), if only we knew how the twentieth century Iraq was replete with instances of individuals, families, and neighbourhoods from Sunni, Shii, Jewish, and Christian communities engaged in interactions and shared lives (see pp. 6-7)? The recent upsurge in the literature on cosmopolitanism (even though highly diverse) points to welcome efforts to rectify the discourse of confrontation and mistrust, by resurrecting the ideal of living together. But how do we perceive “cosmopolitanism”?

Cosmopolitanism refers to both social conditions and an ethical project. In the first place, it signifies certain objective processes, such as globalization and international migration, that compel people of diverse communal, national, or racial affiliations to associate, work, and live together. These processes lead to diminishing cultural homogeneity in favour of diversity, variety, and plurality of cultures, religions, and lifestyles. In this sense Dubai, for instance, represents a cosmopolitan city-state in the sense that it juxtaposes individuals and families of diverse national, cultural, and racial belongings, who live and work next to one another within a small geographical space. Indeed modern urbanity per se can potentially contribute to cosmopolitan habitus by facilitating geographies of coexistence between the members of different religious or ethnic groups. But this may be so not just because people of different religions and cultures naturally come to live and interact with each other; after all neighbours might dislike and distrust one another. Rather because proximity and interaction can supply opportunities for divergent parties to experience trust (as well as mistrust) between them.

Cosmopolitanism has also ethical and normative dimensions; it is a project, something to be cherished. In this sense, cosmopolitanism is deployed to challenge the language of separation and antagonism, to confront cultural superiority and ethnocentrism. It further stands opposed to communalism, where the inward-looking and close-knit ethnic or religious collectives espouse narrow, exclusive, and selfish interests. Cosmopolitanism of this sort also overrides the “multiculturalist” paradigm. Because although multiculturalism calls for equal coexistence of different cultures within a national society, it is still preoccupied with cultural boundaries – an outlook that departs from cosmopolitan life-world where intense interaction, mixing, and sharing tend to blur communal boundaries, generating hybrid and “impure” cultural practices. The initiative of the Palestinian-Italian music group, Radiodervish (see pp. 12-13) to create multilingual songs where lyrics range from Italian, Arabic, to English and French, amplifies such a cosmopolitan project of crossing cultural and linguistic boundaries.

But is this lifestyle not the prerogative of the elites as the critiques often claim? Certainly elites are in a better material position to experi-

**Perpetrated by the media and policy circles, the language of clash currently dominates interreligious and intercultural relations, overlooking the more common human practices based upon association and cooperation. It is therefore high time to invoke the notion of “everyday cosmopolitanism” both as a scholarly inquiry and an ethical project.**

ence cosmopolitan lifestyles; they are the ones who can easily afford frequent travelling, developing taste for different cuisines and alternative modes of life and cultural products. In addition, unlike the poor, the privileged groups need not to rely on exclusive communalistic networks as a venue to secure social protection – something that

tends to reinforce more inward-looking communalism. However, the objective possibility to experience mixing, mingling, and sharing is not the same as the subjective desire to do so. The question is how many of those elite expatriates residing in the metropolises of the global South share cultural life with those of the poor of the host society? In a closer look, the cosmopolitan Dubai turns out to be no more than a “city-state of relatively gated communities” (pp. 10-11) marked by sharp communal and spatial boundaries, with labour camps (of south Asian migrants) and the segregated milieu of “parochial jet-setters,” or the “cosmopolitan es” of the Western elite expatriates who remain bounded within the physical safety and cultural purity of their own exclusive collectives.

It is a mistake to limit cosmopolitan exchange solely to the prerogative of the elites. Indeed, there is a serious need to pay scholarly attention to the cosmopolitanism of the ordinary people in their daily lives. Evidence from twentieth century Cairo, Baghdad, or Aleppo suggests how, beyond the elites, the ordinary members of different religious communities – Muslims, Jews, Christians, Shiites, or Sunnis – were engaged in intense inter-communal exchange and shared lives in the localities or at work. In the everyday life, women in particular act as protagonists in initiating cosmopolitan exchanges and association. In mixed neighbourhoods, women generally move easily between houses, chatting, exchanging gossip, and lending or borrowing things from their neighbours. They participate in weddings, funerals, or religious festivals. Children of different confessional affiliations play together in the alleyways while teens befriend and men go on neighbourly visits. All these exemplify what I like to call “everyday cosmopolitanism” of the subaltern.

By everyday cosmopolitanism I mean the idea and practice of transcending self – at the various levels of individual, family, tribe, religion, ethnicity, community, and nation – to associate with agonistic others in everyday life. It describes the ways in which the ordinary members of different ethno-religious and cultural groupings mix, mingle, intensely interact, and share in values and practices – the cultures of food, fashion, language, and symbols – in history and memory. It signifies how such association and sharing affect the meaning of “us” and “them” and its dynamics, which in turn blurs and problematizes the meaning of group boundaries. The “everyday cosmopolitanism” may not go as far as the often abstract and philosophical notions of Stoicist “world citizenship,” but engages in the modest and down-to-earth though highly relevant ways in which ordinary men and women from different communal cosmos manage to engage, associate, and live together at the level of the everyday.

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